The Puzzle House (scraps)

Dump 2

Zero Philosophy
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There wasn't much more to be learnt from the coin, Beadle thought. He had been studying it for so long his mind swam in weary circles of dazzled repetition. The tarnished silver disc was smudged with patterns of awesome but elusive significance. He had begun to suspect that those mysteries which still escaped him would escape him forever – and they were many. The challenge quickened and saddened him, simultaneously, prompting him back to his studies.

What might once have been a face was now eroded – eyes lost among scattered pits, mouth twisted into an erratic chasm, locks of hair no more than a vague turbulence – hints of coiling serpents. There was no longer a face, not even a head, and what there was (instead) was fractioning, triadically, into the disintegrated features of Zommoddybpskhattao, where everything begins and ends, out to the uttermost ragged fringes of time. The faded mask, pasted over that, was no more than an Ozymandian banality. An ancient prince, no doubt, once intoxicated by his own grandeur, now phased out into oblivion. *Henderson*, he thought, laughing, until disgusted by the alien sound of a spasming animal. No, it wasn't Henderson – a ridiculous thought – but it had been inscribed with the prototype of a recent drama. That was why it had continued to speak, in confident, silvery tones. Echoes of a crumbling kingdom. Distant gear-grindings from the machinery of doom.

No indications of value were still legible, but that did not matter. It had been minted, unmistakably, as the payment for a world. From its edges, a darkness crept inward. The erasure that he had, at first, taken to be a crude clipping – obliterating roughly a third of the flat surface – could now be seen as a termination; the work of slicing shadow. The night had to eat. Still now, after such hideous durations, it had scarcely begun to eat. The ring of signs, once arrayed about the perimeter, had been effaced into utter abstraction – the ghostly remains of dates, realms, emperors, and promises. It could not be 1890, not even 890, nothing so recent, and now he laughed again a little – among those sensible mutterings from the Gulf of Whispers – like a child, wildly, although obscurely ashamed. Quasi-random craterings re-sorted themselves. He rubbed his eyes. Wisps of cloud drifted across the faceless devastation.

He turned away from the grill-strengthened window, attention captured by a soft commotion at the door. It was the New Emperor, flanked by bodyguards.

“How are things Beadle?” The Master enquired politely, as he stepped inside. “It’s better without the muzzle, yes?”

Beadle nodded a little, but said nothing. Words were trouble. Everything had conspired to teach him that. Yet words were to be demanded, he could tell.

“Times change now,” he stammered, searching for a neutral, banal fact.

“Yes, quite so,” Doctor Frenzill replied, apparently pleased. “We shall have to adjust. That won’t be an impossible problem, will it?”

Did he understand that the Aeon of Kao had at last begun? Beadle couldn’t be sure. Nothing less than total ruin would open the Last Gate, but it would still be hidden – for a while – by the Circus. Perhaps he *had* seen – his complacent manner and unharrowed face indicating strength, rather than ignorance. Yet it was more likely that the impending Vision remained in occlusion, if only for a little longer. If the walls groaned, they still held. Signs multiplied, surreptitious, and mute. The Old Emperor was in the arena, a maddened, bloodied avatar of the dying day. Ravens were gathering, silently. The earth trembled.

“Late,” he murmured.

Frenzill nodded. Outside, the night seethed, tugged apart by confused winds.

“Doctor Boggs noticed something today,” he said. It was meant as a mix of pleasantry and diversion, but then he worried it wasn’t either. “Or so I heard,” he added, in a stumbled retraction, but he had already missed the chance for that.

“Really?” Frenzill asked, his concentration suddenly sharpened to a blade-edge.

“He thinks the stories have to be unreliable. They contain far too much death and atrocity to fit in here.”

“Oh, that.”

“He hadn’t realized …”

“No?” Frenzill was unable, fully, to suppress a condescending smirk. “How peculiar. But it isn’t your problem, is it Beadle? It’s a management issue, if anything, and it’s on the other side.”

“You’re right Doctor,” Beadle humbly conceded. “I’m told things, and then they burrow in. Perhaps if I got better …” They both knew that would never happen. Curiosity prompted him

onwards. “It’s odd back there, before the passage, isn’t it? Less broken, yet so unknowing, like a dream spun out of glass, waiting to shatter.”

“That’s what the first stage is like.”

It was unusual for Frenzill to be so forthcoming.

Like every other cell on the West Wing, Compartment-83 had been vividly decorated by its occupant. In compliance with the interest of uninhibited communication, expressive materials were made freely available. According to the official therapeutic pretence, the resulting works were *abreactive scrawls*, resolving pathological complexes, but nobody took that description seriously. There was nothing that could be mistaken for healing taking place in these swirling profusions of atavistic imagery and inconclusive calculation. Frenzill’s flitting gaze was drawn past the Barrow ciphers and tick drifts, through The Temple of Keys, to the largest and most lurid of the pictures; a tensed knot of fangs and claws, ripping itself into evidence from reddened blackness. It could only be Kao, Last of the Time Lemurs, caught in its consummate canine-feline ambiguity.

“A favored authority of yours?”

“No, not at all,” Beadle answered, with a hint of tightly-controlled fatalistic melancholy. “But sovereign here.”

Frenzill nodded. “She hurts you?” he asked, the pretended sympathy drowning in moon-lit lagoons of fascination.

“Her talons are scalpels. The profundity of the surgery far exceeds the pain.”

“Good, good …” He had already ceased to listen. There were so many other calls upon his attention, especially now.

At the feet of the abominable image Beadle had constructed a little shrine from repurposed packaging and magazine clippings. The dead stalks of some long-departed plant served as fake incense sticks.

Frenzill angled his gaze away from it, repulsed. He had business to complete here.

“Do they still speak to you about Slurrszakh?” The question was supposed to sound casual, but it didn’t.

Beadle backed away warily. “I hear some things,” he said eventually, with obvious reluctance. Then – because if he could not change the subject, he could perhaps twist it – “He was your

teacher, they say."

A flicker of something that might have been rage crossed Frenzill's face. "Don't reach too far beyond yourself Beadle, unless you want to fall even further down."

3 Comments

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